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by Rainbow Shultz

My husband's got no mouth, but he eats through his nose and yells through his ears. He's mostly got his bases covered—his eyes can whisper and kiss. At baseball games, I try to sit on the bleachers above or below him because those ears can make some noise. There are small obstacles, like driving. If he's whispering sweet nothings to me, we practically go off the road, so I usually drive, unless we've come from a party. He doesn't drink much because beer bubbles, and wine stings his nose. Things are usually good. We're casual, simple really. He reupholsters furniture and does a fine job. When it's time to put on those upholstery tacks, watch out—I'd like to put some earmuffs on him.

We've got a dog without a tail and a cat without stripes. Sometimes I imagine there are a mouth and a tail and stripes somewhere, in the neighbor's garage, borrowed, or blown with newspapers and trash into the alley. But we manage. I suppose people probably laugh at the cat, but plain grey is what she is, and we love her anyway.

Our favorite activity is spelunking. We go every other Saturday with our spelunking club, and it's downright amazing, the stalactites we've seen. I know that they take hundreds of years to form, but sometimes I yank one off the ceiling because I've got a collection going in the bathroom. A long, steamy mineral bath can grow a stalactite by one nanometer a day.

I haven't told you about our son Harold yet because I guess it's hard for me to talk about him. You just think that when you love somebody and you are loved back, and you are both so perfect, that a child that you create together should be perfect, too. It turns out that you don't really have a choice. Your children are priceless gifts sent to you, but as I've heard folks say, there was no catalog to order them from. Our Harold is seven, and he is still unable to multiply, divide, subtract, or even add. He is mathematically inept, although his father and I consider ourselves above average in that department.

Sometimes, late at night, when I am out of sleepy tea and the moon is too bright to sleep to, I imagine strands of DNA turning and twisting, a slow-motion tango. They are looking for their partners, feeling around for matches, and clicking into place. And then I imagine my husband's and my math genes, and I play out different scenarios. In some dreams, the chromosome containing my math gene shrivels up and dies. It looks like a twig on fire, curling up into itself. In other scenarios, my chromosome rejects my husband's. She simply refuses to click. I have rented science videos. I have watched pink and blue strands of spaghetti move slowly toward one another. I want to see them just one time reject one another, or be blown apart by rebellious, fast-moving cells traveling out of control. In the videos, this never happens. I am left to imagine in the silver darkness of my bed. Maybe our strands clung to one another too tightly in an instant of microscopic lust. In my more optimistic half-wakefulness, they have sought each other out and embraced in a violent ecstasy. The math gene is broken off its chromosome in a fit of delight, the half-noodle spiraling away into the abyss of red and white cells, a forgotten soldier in our bodies' chaotic battleground. Whether this tiny piece of math is eaten, unknowingly or unfavorably, by a white cell, I am unsure. It is possible that it floats alone, up and down the long stretches of blood-and-lymph highway that make up my husband or myself. An extra heartbeat or a sudden neck pain, even an unexplained throb in my wrist or finger, and I wonder for a brief second if it is that gene traveling through my body, the eternal hitchhiker, wandering through a landscape with no escape.

Despite my early-morning explanations, the math gene *is* lost, we believe for good, from my

son, Harold. I am confident, however, that like so many other families that I have seen on TV, we will find a way to cope.

It was on a family spelunking trip when we first realized Harold's deficiency. The members of the club on the trip that day were Grace and Mr. Ogglebean, as usual, and two families with children both a bit younger and a bit older than Harold. Grace and Mr. Ogglebean are two of the three founding members of the club, and they rarely miss an expedition. Grace is blind but luckily can hear color, and she "oohs" and "ahhs" often. She is always struck by what she calls the svelte melody of glass and velveteen. These are the colors that dance between black and grey.

The darkest stalactites in the darkest caverns are the most spectacular to Grace, and thus our trips are mapped accordingly. Mr. Ogglebean is, I believe, in love with Grace, but my husband disagrees. Mr. Ogglebean speaks when spoken to, or when absolutely necessary, but is otherwise silent. The wispy, grey, cloud-like hair that starts halfway down his head floats around him like a protective cushion around an otherwise sharp and tightly-skinned man. Through his clothing one can see the knuckles of his spine where the slump that is his posture begins. Because of his constant hunch, Mr. Ogglebean is unable to look up at the stalactites that the rest of us seek out so enthusiastically, and yet he is always there, a founding member of the club.

We were in two boats on that trip. A mother and her son in our boat, along with the two regulars and ourselves. Two fathers and a mother manned the other boat with four other children. I am unsure as to who belonged to whom. These parents were proud and excited about whatever this group of children did, whether it was pushing one another or just vacantly staring and sitting. At one point, one of the larger children pointed out a small group of stalactites that hung together like a group of bats from a cave wall. "Look, Ma," he gasped, "nine pointy sticks together on the ceiling."

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

"Nine!" she exclaimed. "How did you count so quickly? Dan! Did you hear that? Anthony counted to nine in his head! And so quickly! I hadn't even seen them yet!"

"Is that right?" the husband, Dan, called back to the amazed mother in our boat. "Fantastic work, Tony! What does nine come before?"

"Ten, Dad," little Anthony answered, and before you knew it, our quiet outing had become something of a game show, with each child seeking out groups of stalactites desperately, as far as

the lanterns would shine, and screaming numbers louder and more quickly than the last. I was certain that this maniacal mob of children began making up numbers entirely, but their parents continued to gush. They seemed nearly to faint in their enormous admiration for their children's counting skills. By halfway through the trip, the number one was sufficient for a mother to "ooh" or a father to pat his kid's knee enthusiastically. We had reached a point of frenzy, which I was sure we would not be returning from until this expedition had ended.

Meanwhile, Harold sat quietly between Grace and Mr. Ogglebean. He quietly murmured agreement with Grace's assessment of colors, or passed Mr. Ogglebean a tissue when asked. He looked intently at the ancient, salty history above and around him and in his apparent wonder seemed deaf to the chaotic game of numbers.

I decided at the time not to engage him in the asinine competition that had developed, but I watched him, and I wondered whether he, in his reverie, silently counted stalactites as well. As I later found, and as you already know, he did not. He pondered the strength of gravity upon the different weights of slowly-forming liquids. He marveled at the low yet intense roar of the stream pushing away rock that had once, at the earth's inception, been liquid itself. He studied the organic blackness that grew along the waterline and thought of ways to transform energy without photosynthesis. But he never once counted the stalactites. "Count?" he asked me, puzzled at my insistence on examining his thoughts during the trip. "Would that not be making an innate presupposition of the absence of an infinite body of movement growing toward form?"

That's when I knew, and the struggle for my husband and me began. Of course we tested him again. And again. Apples, people in a family, dogs in a cage. Elemental concepts in arithmetic. And we became increasingly crushed at the realization of his disability. For instance, we might ask what even most four-year-olds could answer: Harold, how much does two plus two equal? And he would answer, " 'Equal'? That's an interesting concept, isn't it? To presume 'equal,' might we also be presuming stasis in the conjunction of the — what do you call them — 'two's'?" Or he might say, "How can you mandate these 'pluses' when our sovereignty and connectivity have been proven prior to determining labels for the classes of matter just described?" You get the idea. Basically, Harold is dumb as nails, and even though he's in second grade, he still can't even add or subtract at a kindergarten level.

His father and I had to discuss what this would mean for his future—and ours. Without numbers, there are no bills, no rent, no television channels, no shoe sizes, no addresses, no prices on a menu. Basically there is nothing available that he would ever need, and we could not accept that.

We sent Harold to math camp.

We tried on the drive there to save him. We quizzed him over and over. How many stop signs is that? How many cows there? How many fingers am I holding up? How many restaurants are right there, advertising baked cod? If only he'd answered "one" instead of "And again we return to the concept of 'many,' which I agree is a wonderful little measuring cup pouring and filling up with little specks of infinity; and when does this pouring stop, and *when* is this 'many'?"

We dropped him off at a little green cabin called "Multiple Moose" and drove away quickly. I didn't let my husband see me cry. We waited two weeks. He made more noise than usual in the shop, and we skipped a spelunking trip that weekend. I started a bunny and rose garden, and the roses kept getting away. We tiptoed through our tension, and when we made love, I cringed, imagining what other chromosomes might never find one another.

When we drove to pick him up, we were both filled with excitement and gloom. We were mostly silent. When my husband blew his nose, I think he was counting fence posts aloud just to reassure himself that he was still unbroken, but he used a

tissue, and I can rarely understand him through a two-ply sheet.

The children were lined up by size when we arrived. They stood next to suitcases and macramé pot holders and held balsa wood boats and framed report cards. Harold was standing toward the middle of the line, but we didn't mind. We've never been ashamed of his average stature. As we approached, I became aware of an expression of bewilderment on Harold's face. He looked as if a fast-moving thunderstorm had passed over him without warning. He was both wet and stirred. He was a cocktail poured from a briskly-handled shaker. His report card hung limply from his hands. I picked it up, smiling gingerly, and read it while resting my hand on Harold's poor slumped shoulders. On the line where a grade should have been, there was a blank left in the typed proclamation: "This student has graduated successfully from Evergreen Mathematics Camping School with the signifigant grade of __ on this day in June, blah blah and blah...." I didn't need to read on. Where a grade should have been, instead, in small eight-point font, Times New Roman, I believe, was a note: "Parents, please see supervisory staff, thank you." Now Harold, as I've told you, is only seven, but his reading skills are excellent, so I knew he was already aware of the bad news. I bent over to hug him and quietly asked how he was. He answered that he was fine. I asked him what he thought of his report card, and he shrugged. "They spelled *significant* wrong," he said without emotion. I had to acknowledge that he was right, but this small fact did nothing to stop the feeling of hopelessness that was pouring over me like a washing machine filling up over a tired pair of dirty socks. I passed the report card listlessly to my husband, who wheezed through his ears and gently held me. I thought I might faint. We told Harold to stay put and to sit on his suitcase if he liked, and we went to find the supervisory staff. Inside the large log-cabin-style building in the middle of the camp, we were directed down sterile halls covered with D-grade nubby grey carpet and murals of cartooned wild animals with simple algebraic equations coming out of their mouths in cartoon bubbles. I held my husband's hand, as we were both feeling dreadful, although it is true that during those last moments walking down that hall, a strand of hope lingered, connecting us more than our hands ever could have.

When we entered the office labeled "Director," as we had been instructed to do, I believe that we both felt a little bit worse. A man and woman sat before us in one of the tackiest rooms that, still to this day, I have ever been in. As you know, my husband upholsters furniture, and so I know that for him as well, the décor was almost belligerent. There was something so trite and so obnoxious about the junior-high-school-principal's-office look, mixed with outdoor camp widgets and sprinkled with "I'm so smart at math" gadgets, that I almost threw up. Smokey the Bear was painted on the wall holding a calculator and scratching his head, presumably over a tough math problem he'd found in the woods. The couple stood up after slowly closing the books of paperwork they had been working on, and they asked us to be seated. They introduced themselves as Reginold and Charlene Dashwick. "Yes," the woman specified, "*Miss* Dashwick," which I took to be her way of telling us that they were siblings rather than married, and I did begin to notice quite a resemblance. They were both missing noses, which must have just run in the family, as they say. In any case, I murmured a hello, my husband winked, and we waited for the verdict.

"Well," Reginold began, "there is, as they say, good news, and there's bad news, I'm afraid."

"Yes," Charlene continued, "and we would prefer to begin with the good news, although we do realize that many people, maybe even two-thirds of people, prefer it in the opposite order."

"Somewhat of a dessert after a terrible meal, if you will," Reginold said, smiling. I began to think of the terrible meal I'd had on the drive to camp. I felt quite certain that I was about to vomit

that terrible meal right then. As I sat concentrating on pushing the baked cod back down from where it rose, they continued. "Your son, Harold, has *re*-solved, as I like to phrase it, the theory of relativity."

"Yes," Reginold chuckled, "one-upped old Albert, if you will. It seems that Einstein forgot one variable in his famous little equation, and your Harold has pointed that out." Reginold smiled warmly. "To us and the international community, that is. *Apparently*, time is relative to lightness, in that it moves more slowly through it. Time, as Harold pointed out, moves more quickly through darkness, which you may not notice, of course, as the speed is relative in the same amount to all of us. Energy is light, you know, and lightness does vary. Anyhoo—very interesting stuff—death and darkness and infinite speed and all. Everyone from the theologians to the black-hole aficionados are pretty excited about this. Yes, your son, Harold, came up with the theorem for the ever-changing variable placed before the E when equaling MC squared, and got himself a most definite Nobel Prize."

Charlene was beaming as well. "I believe that the prize is worth two point eight million these days, but it does vary due to inflation, of course. That's something I'm sure you will look into in any case."

Neither my husband nor I moved. I believe his ears were fogging. After a moment of silence, with them smiling and us stunned, the sort of silence one might hear before a standing ovation, my husband turned to me, and before I could stop myself, the words that we all knew were coming fell into their eternal position. "And the bad news?"

The smiles on the faces of Reginold and Charlene shifted into sympathetic mode. Their heads tilted slightly. "Well," Reginold began, "your son did technically fail camp. I'm afraid that he is in a group of very few persons unable to pass even the Counting Coyotes level. It's very unusual. Usually no more than one child every year or two is quite this inept." Charlene nodded mournfully and passed a pamphlet across the desk with both hands. "This could help all of you," she said. "Grandwood is a wonderful institution, very beautiful grounds."

"Yes, they do keep them up quite nicely," Reginold agreed. "When we encounter the rare child who isn't able to be remediated whatsoever, we truly believe that Grandwood is the best option." Charlene continued, agreeing, "It's just too hard, as you know, for families to try to educate their children mathematically forever. It's ineffective and it's painful. You two know that as well as anybody does." We nodded. It *was* painful. We *were* in pain. It's like I've already mentioned. An imperfect child is like a magnifying glass on your own imperfections.

"Grandwood," I slowly whispered. "Where? Or when—" Charlene interrupted me then and spoke calmly. "It's a wonderful place, you'll see. It's an hour west of here, and there's open enrollment. It really is the best, and with the prize money, you won't have trouble supporting Harold for a very long time."

My husband reached again for my hand, and I held his tightly. We thanked them quietly and returned to the bright sunshine that filled the path back to the parking lot where Harold waited. I let my tears fall, but neither my husband nor I said a word. Inside my head, although the wind blew through the leaves throughout the camp with the intense crashing of buildings falling, I steadied myself by watching each step that my feet took, and counting them one, two, three, four....

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